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ABSTRACT

Analysis of work rhetoric and economic vision in selected television ads from the 1984 presidential campaign showed that the ads of both Mondale and Reagan appropriated traditional "work ethic" appeals in presenting the candidates' economic visions, although each candidate emphasized different aspects of the American Dream. Mondale's surprisingly strong union, blue collar vision was materially grounded in the idea of work and stressed entitlements, fairness, and class division. Mondale ads featured material gains such as houses and stressed the worker/drone distinction--the difference between honest work and skimming off the profits of others. His most compelling ad featured a roller coaster, depicting the dizzying effects of Reagan's economic policy on working Americans. However, Reagan's vision emphasized hope, opportunity, upward mobility, and unity, seeking to hegemonize by bringing all Americans under a single ideological voice in pursuit of Reagan's definition of the American Dream. Reagan ads included business and managerial classes in the American Dream by depicting a unity between small business and labor. Nothing was guaranteed in Reagan's ads; rather he offered a chance to earn one's own way. These ads also played to Americans' sense of individualism and upward mobility and stressed that Reagan was rebuilding a lost dream, not creating a new one. Though slickly made, Reagan's ads were much less concrete than Mondale's and projected an abstract vision. (SKC)

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THE RHETORIC OF WORK AND ECONOMIC VISION IN THE MONDALE AND REAGAN 1984 CAMPAIGN TELEVISION ADS

by

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THE RHETORIC OF WORK AND ECONOMIC VISION IN THE MONDALE AND REAGAN 1984 CAMPAIGN TELEVISION ADS

ABSTRACT

In his award-winning study of the work ethic in our culture (**The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920**, 1978) Daniel Rodgers emphasized the "infinitely flexible" nature of work rhetoric in our political discourse. This analysis of work rhetoric and economic vision in selected television ads from the 1984 presidential campaign shows that Mondale's and Reagan's ads both appropriated traditional "work ethic" appeals in presenting the candidates' economic visions.

Mondale's surprisingly strong union, blue-collar vision materially grounded the idea of work and stressed entitlements, fairness, and class division. Reagan's vision emphasized hope, opportunity, upward mobility, and unity, seeking to hegemonize by bringing all Americans under a single ideological voice in pursuit of its proffered definition of the American Dream.

This paper is part of the "Rhetorical Strategies in the 1984 Presidential Campaign" project conducted at the University of Utah by Professors Dennis C. Alexander and Malcolm O. Sillars. The author wishes to thank Professor Dennis C. Alexander for his support and critique.

The Rhetoric of Work and Economic Vision in the Mondale and Reagan 1984 Campaign Television Ads

Introduction

The 1984 presidential campaign was not a good one in which to study the **effects** of the candidates' televised ads, since it was pretty much over before it began[1] (Diamond and Bates, 1985), but, as is the case in landslides, the voters were presented with a clear choice, and the televised campaign ads reveal much about the nature of that choice. The most salient issue was the economy. Reagan ran on his economic record and its promise of a rosy future. Mondale ran on Reagan's record too--record deficits and the alleged unfairness of Reaganomics. In their television ads both candidates presented a vision consistent with their stated policies and personal beliefs. (There was no "selling" of the president or the challenger, at least in the sinister sense of the term as McGinniss, 1969, used it.) Both deftly appropriated the deeply imbued and "infinitely flexible" (Rodgers, 1978, p. 231) theme of the work ethic to their own ends. Our peculiarly American work ideology has been adaptable to both liberal and consevative ends. And a close look at selected Mondale and Reagan televised ads[2] on themes of work and the economy reveal the paradoxical, protean nature of one of our culture's fundamental ideologies.

Early in the race, the Mondale camp chose to make the budget deficit a

major issue (Diamond and Bates, p. 56). Trading on the belief that Reaganomics had engendered class polarization (Ladd, 1984, p. 41), the campaign was to emphasize class division, fairness, and entitlements. His dry style notwithstanding, Mondale did have a detailed vision of America which centered on the key themes of a sense of community, the restoration of American excellence, and the need for a president with experience (Light, 1984, p. 13). It was Mondale's sense of community and his personal experiences that spawned his notions of fairness and entitlement.[3] Although his father was a minister and his mother a schoolteacher, Mondale's economic vision presented in the 1984 television ads is very much union blue-collar. The idea of work in the ads is materially grounded; work is not idealized for any intrinsic value but for the material security it provides. The economic vision in the ads is class conscious and reflects some of the history of the American radical farm and labor rhetoric.

Reagan, enjoying comfortable leads in the polls from wire to wire, needed only to run on the present state of the economy and a vision of even better times, and if the ghost of Jimmy Carter popped up from time to time, so much the better. Reagan's three themes, according to his pollster Richard Wirthlin, were strong leadership, effectiveness, and dealing boldly with the future (Wattenberg, 1985, p. 10). These themes were worked into and around his economic vision. The Reagan ads on economic issues, aside from reminding viewers of where they were four years ago, stressed opportunity and appropriated work ideology into the impressionistic (both visually and verbally) wrap of the American Dream. The ads emphasize

promise, hope, togetherness, and, lest the Reagan camp be accused of soft-peddling the vision, chance. The future is emphasized by showing America to be in "the morning" or "springtime," although the Reagan ads also imply that the rosy future is really a reclamation of an idealized past, this epic sense of a shared past serving a hegemonic function.

The Mondale Ads

One Mondale ad opens with Geraldine Ferraro saying to a crowd, "You want more for your kids than you had, and that's the American Dream." The meaning of the word "more" quickly is translated into material terms emphasizing class conflict. Mondale and Ferraro are said to be "bringing a new fairness to America. While Mr. Reagan tries to slash Medicare, they fight for seniors, while he forces four million people out of work, they fight for workers. And on tax breaks [Mondale quote, to crowd] 'I refuse to make your family pay more so that millionaires can pay less.'" The enthymematic assumption is that workers indeed are entitled to their share of the national wealth in terms of government programs and a progressive tax system. This emphasis continues in another ad which opens with a shot of a modest, one-story home, its lights shining brightly in the twilight. "After you work a lifetime to pay-off your house, you expect to be free and clear," the narrator begins. The next shot is of the White House in full daylight which austerely fills the frame in contrast to

the warmth projected in the previous shot. The narrator continues, "But in another American house there are plans that could put you 18,000 dollars in debt--your share of Mr. Reagan's deficits." The narrator goes on as the shot cuts back to the modest home and tells the viewer that when Mondale moves into the White House "he won't forget about your place." The attack on the deficit again is couched in material terms. One works a lifetime to pay off a house. Work is seen as its material manifestation in the form of a house, with the attendant suggestion of security, just as the American Dream in the previous ad was portrayed in the material security of a governmental program such as Medicare which is financed, in turn, by a "fair," progressive tax system.

Another Mondale ad makes the old worker/drone distinction which hearkens back to Nortons's 1880's pro-labor fable (see Rodgers, p. 210). Over an opening shot of the Treasury Building, the narrator begins, "In this building Mr. Reagan's people are borrowing the money that's putting each of us 18,000 dollars into debt." He continues as the video cuts to lower body shots of well-dressed people carrying briefcases and getting into limosines, "And who walks away with the money? 90,000 profitable corporations that pay no taxes. Defense contractors on bloated budgets. Foreign interests who make money on our debt. What the deficit really means is that you're paying for their free ride." The text and images, steeped in the radical tradition of Henry George and the anti-bank campaigners of the 1870's and 1880's, leave little doubt as to who are the workers and who are the drones. And while the workers pay for the drones'

free ride, another Mondale spot strongly suggests that working Americans have been "taken for a ride" by Reagan and his cohorts.

The Mondale roller coaster spot was, arguably, his most compelling visual representation of the economic issue of the campaign. The narrator begins, "Nineteen eighty-two," as the roller coaster plummets downward, "Reaganomics sinks our country into the deepest recession and unemployment in fifty years." The coaster is shown inching upwards, but on "a mountain of debt." The ad ends with the coaster plunging once more and the narrator's ominous reminder, "If you're thinking of voting for Ronald Reagan in 1984, think of what will happen in 1985." As George Bush accused Reagan of "voodoo economics" in his 1980 primary bid, so the Mondale camp invests Reaganomics with an aura of unreality in the unsettling carnival-image of the roller coaster with all its suggestions of halls of mirrors, upside-down houses, and cotton candy. The worker is trapped in a series of gut wrenching plunges and anxious climbs which symbolize the historic plight of the wage earner as the passive victim of business cycles and economic manipulations carried out far from the factories and farms (see Rodgers, pp.115-120). The cause is Reaganomics which, the ad suggests, has in its valorization of free market and supply side ideals left the wage earner at the mercy of markets and manipulations no matter how hard he works, the passive perspective of the roller coaster rider's point of view suggesting that a different class is in control.

It is common political wisdom to allow that a candidate far behind in

the polls is accorded the luxury of being himself. Still, in an age of supposed political realignment and new conservatism, it is slightly jarring to note the extremely material, class conscious economic vision in the Mondale ads which focus on the hard-won economic status of the blue collar middle class and its right to its share of the collective wealth. The Mondale vision presents work in terms of what labor buys with no idealizing about work (see Rodgers, Ch. 6, and Shorris, 1981, Ch. 6) and reminds workers that they have won their security not necessarily through hard work but through a long political process fought in the arena of class conflict. It also suggests that their security is endangered by a president unsympathetic to their class, a president whose policies will abandon them to the vagaries of free market economics with all of its insecurity and dislocation. The Mondale ads remind the wage earners that traditional Democratic policies helped them to get where they are and that workers are in danger of losing their place.

The Reagan ads

The Reagan ads on the economy stand in clear oppostion. They avoid all notions of conflict and seek to hegemonize, to bring all Americans into a single ideological voice of togetherness in pusuit of the American Dream. Two of the Reagan spots are structured rhetorically by defining the American Dream in such a way as to accomodate work rhetoric more in terms of the business and managerial classes. One ad begins with a shot of

a barber sweeping the sidewalk outside his shop and cuts to shots of factory workers thus suggesting a unity between small business and labor. The voice is Reagan's, "A chance to earn your own way, to work at an honest job, to earn a decent wage. That's always been the American Dream." Richard Weaver asserted that definition was the highest form of argument and that it also was characteristic of conservative argument (1970, pp. 210-11). On the darker side, however, Earl Shorris has equated the propensity for definition to be characteristic of the totalitarian cast of mind (p. 79). By subsuming work ideology under a rationalized definition of the American Dream, Reagan may be seen as performing a kind of abstracting definition of happiness that seeks to pull classes together in pusuit of a necessarily ill-defined goal in the interests of hegemony. As opposed to Mondale' strong sense of entitlement, Reagan defines the economic aspect of the American Dream as a "chance" to earn and work. Nothing is guaranteed. And the notion of "earning one's own way" cuts to the heart of the dual nature of work rhetoric in our history. It suggests economic independence, but to what extent? Does it suggest that one should become independent of Medicare, unemployment benefits, or social security? In reality, Reagan has not touched these basic entitlements, but the television ads present a subtle "what if" motif. Reagan goes on to assure the viewer that "That's always been the American Dream," thereby herding the viewer back into the hegemonic corral. It is now "our dream" and it "lives again;" as Reagan leads to the future, having assured the viewer that he has, in some epic sense, resurrected an ideal

past. The epic sense of unity continues. "By rolling up our sleeves and pulling together, we now have more people working than ever before--six and one-half million new jobs and the best growth opportunity since World War II. So now we can look to the day when no one can be denied the promise that is America." Reagan ends with his record, emphasizing growth, opportunity, and promise.

In one of Mondale's long ads he is quoted that he would rather be "an underdog in a campaign about decency than be ahead in a campaign about self interest." Ironically, it was the Mondale camp who clearly articulated what they perceived to be the economic self interest of the working class wage earners, and it was Reagan who sought to blunt any specific notions of self interest by virtue of an abstract rhetoric of dream and unity.

Another Reagan spot begins, "It was the dream that built a nation. The freedom to work at the job of your choice, to reap the rewards of your labors, to leave a richer life to your children and their children beyond." The text is accompanied by shots of factory workers which include a black and an over-sixty male. The phrase "freedom to work at a job of one's choice" may be rejoinder to Mondale's strong union stance by subtly echoing the anti-union shibboleth, "right to work."[4] The notion of reaping the rewards of one's labors echoes the phrase "earn your own way" in the first ad. And the ads play to the strong sense of individualism in the American psyche which also explains why American workers never became as radical and class divided as their European counterparts. The idea that a man was entitled to the fruits of his labors was deeply ingrained in the

work rhetoric of both wage earners and businessmen in America, while more radical voices argued that such notions undermined the collective nature of industrial labor and left workers fragmented and vulnerable to more market-dependent scales of renumeration (Rodgers, p. 218). The Reagan ads spoke directly to the individualistic impulse of the American working class which only half-heartedly has embraced class consciousness but has wholeheartedly embraced the notion of upward mobility. And the upward mobility is characterized as "leaving a richer life for your children and their children beyond," suggesting something almost transcendental, something more than just a higher standard of living and right to entitlement alluded to in Ferraro's statement about wanting "more for your kids than you had." As the first Reagan ad reminded the viewer that the dream lives again, so this second ad ends by claiming that President Reagan is "rebuilding the American Dream."

Rodgers noted that an image of a lost Eden characterized rhetoric about work at the turn of the century--"A world where everyone worked and everyone was happy" (p. 210). The regaining of Eden is strongly portended in several of Reagan's spots. The future in the Reagan ads is really the regaining of an epic sense of the past. As such, it remains shadowy in actual material history. Two other ads which focus on the state of the nation in 1980 leave no doubt that the economic Garden of Eden most nearly went to seed during the Carter administration. It was in good hands, one suspects, during the Eisenhower years. But beyond that we are left only with a kind of epic imagination which is part history and part

Hollywood (Barber,1985). While the Reagan camp also understood the necessity of claiming the "future" as a theme (Wattenberg, p. 10), a unifying vision must have its basis in a shared sense of the past. The Reagan television ads reinforced the message Reagan gave elsewhere, that America's future lay in reclaiming its ideal past. This was the theme of the ads which echoed the newness of Eden, in its restored state, by claiming that "we're in the midst of a springtime of hope for America" and, simply, "It's morning in America."

Despite the obvious fact that the Reagan ads operated at a high level of abstraction when compared to Mondale's, there can be no doubt that they gave an accurate picture of Reagan's economic vision and the policies he pursued during his first term in the White House or even the California statehouse, for Reagan's rhetoric of work and economic vision have been remarkably consistent throughout his political career. That the ads were slick does not blunt the fact that they faithfully projected an abstract, hegemonic vision which defined work and the economy in the interests of business but which invited everyone to join in on the hope and prosperity; they banked on the electorate's rejection of the old liberalism of class conflict and entitlement so nobly defended by Mondale.

Epilogue

The final tally showed that Reagan took 56% of the blue collar vote and just barely lost the union vote, thus confirming Ladd's (1984) and

Keene's (1984) mid-campaign predictions that class division and fairness were weak issues. Voters, while still believing in at least the historical value of the union movement (Shogan and Schneider, 1983, p. 42), did not buy Mondale's material, class conscious, strongly union, economic vision. The issue may have been more pragmatic than ideological:

> Our profoundly nonideological public is torn between the belief that in a society that extends opportunity the individual must take advantage of it and be responsible for himself **and** our sense of compassion, duty and responsibility to help those who try hard but can't or don't make it. (Keene, 1984, p. 51)

Future presidential candidates, Keene predicted, will have to embrace this ambiguity.

Mondale's pollster, Peter Hart, admits that the campaign missed the boat on the fairness issue and that future Democratic candidates will have to emphasize economic growth rather than distribution (Wattenberg, 1985, p. 9).

In specifically addressing the conflict of entitlement vs. opportunity in the campaign, Mansfield cited the attraction of the theme of opportunity "which does not call for new expense and promises a better life with less government" (1985, p. 6). Reagan got the electorate to see prosperity in terms of opportunity, and his appeal to unity and togetherness echoed a sense of the failure of entitlements which encourage dependency in various groups, thus fragmenting them into special interests (p. 14). One

of the ironies of the Mondale campaign was that his emphasis on fairness did not square with the popular perception of his having been chopped up by various Democratic interest groups. He found he could stress class division but not national unity. The Mondale ads also reveal that his camp failed to note the extent to which even union workers had adopted middle class mind sets. It is not unusual, as Shorris notes, for a union electrician to complain that cars are too expensive because auto workers make too much (p. 141).

In the final analysis, Mondale was the best Mondale he could be. Campaigning with the conviction of his populist roots, he clearly articulated a waning vision. The old union moxy, its pride and patriotism unquestioned, yet still wary of class divisions, had served well. But the dying industries and global corporate structure had begun to toll its demise. From the vantage point of the present, his ads ring almost elegaic.

Reagan, too, was Reagan. In hitching work rhetoric to the star of opportunity and the receding glimmer of the future, while echoing a lost Eden, he captured another side of work ideology--the promise of upward mobility, of mutually beneficial economic arrangements, of a happy symbiosis by which wage earners might fatten themselves on the nectar trickling down the supply side of the flower.

Notes

[1]For example, the **Los Angeles Times** presidential election exit poll showed that 47 percent of the respondents had made their decision for president before the first February primaries. Tweny-one percent had decided before September. The early deciders favored Reagan by two-to-one (see Ladd, 1985, p. 4).

[2]Selected are representative samples from ads broadcast in prime time between the conclusion of the conventions and the election. Four thirty-second spots from each candidate are used for analysis.

[3]Mondale's commitment to the concept of entitlement was rooted deeply not only in his Minnesota populist heritage but in his personal experience. In a major speech soon after the New Hampshire primary, Mondale spoke of his schoolteacher mother, whom he characterized as a hard worker and good American. But her insurance company cancelled her health policy just after she'd been diagnosed as having cancer. "If it had not been for Medicare, that good woman would have been denied in her last years the dignity and independence that should have been her right" (Light, p. 14).

[4]As an ironic sidelight, Reagan's media director, Doug Watts, noted

that Reagan, in allegiance to his old union, the Screen Actors' Guild, insisted that actors in the group of "Morning Again" commercials be paid residuals rather than one-time fees, thus greatly increasing the cost of the spots (Diamond and Bates, p. 55).

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